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Davidsonian semantic theory and cognitive science of religion¹

Teoria semântica davidsoniana e ciência cognitiva da religião

Mark Quentin Gardiner², Steven Engler³

ABSTRACT

This article investigates the extent to which the cognitive science of religion (CSR) and Donald Davidson's semantic holism (DSH) harmonize. We first characterize CSR, philosophical semantics (and more specifically DSH). We then note a *prima facie* tension between CSR and DSH's view of First-Person Authority (that we know what is meant when we speak in a way that we do not when others speak). If CSR is correct that the causes of religious belief are located in cognitive processes in the mind/brain, then religious insiders might have no idea what they are talking about: only the scholar of CSR would have a chance of knowing what they 'really' mean. The article argues that the resolution to this problem is to take seriously DSH's rejection of semantic bifurcation, specifically rejecting the idea that religious and non-religious language can be sharply distinguished. We conclude by supporting the following claims: (i) common cognitive neural/psychological processes are explanatorily relevant in proposed meaning-theories for any discourse, and (ii) those processes need semantic supplementation with reference to external and naturalistic factors (biological, cultural, environmental etc.).

Keywords: cognitive science of religion, cognitive theory, holism, semantics, philosophy of language, religious studies, theory of religion.

RESUMO

Este artigo investiga o quanto a ciência cognitiva da religião (CCR) e o holismo semântico de Donald Davidson (HSD) se harmonizam. Primeiro caracterizamos a CCR, a semântica filosófica (e mais especificamente o HSD). Notamos, então, uma tensão *prima facie* entre a CCR e a visão do HSD sobre a Autoridade da Primeira Pessoa (que sabemos o que significa quando falamos de uma forma que não fazemos quando os outros falam). Se a CCR estiver correta em afirmar que as causas da crença religiosa estão localizadas nos processos cognitivos da mente/cérebro, então os membros de dentro da religião podem não ter ideia do que estão falando: somente o acadêmico da CCR teria a chance de saber o que eles realmente querem dizer. O artigo argumenta que a resolução para este problema é levar a sério a rejeição do HSD à bifurcação semântica, rejeitando especificamente a ideia de que as linguagens religiosa e não-religiosa podem ser nitidamente distinguidas. Concluímos com as seguintes afirmações: (i) processos neurais/psicológicos cognitivos comuns são ex-

¹ This paper originated as a presentation at the working conference *Meaning in Religion, Cognition and Culture*, University of Aarhus, Denmark, in May 2009. A revised version was presented at the 2009 meeting of the Western Canadian Philosophical Association. The main argument was greatly expanded and placed in a wider context as a target article in the *Journal for the Cognitive Science of Religion*, with six commentaries and a response by the authors (Gardiner and Engler, 2015). That article was geared towards a study-of-religion/s audience, concentrating on methodological challenges that CSR imposes on studying religion. It aimed to bring about a rapprochement between the pro- and the anti-CSR divide in the contemporary study of religion/s. This article, distinct but overlapping, is geared towards a philosophical audience.

² Mount Royal University. Department of Humanities. 4825 Mount Royal Gate SW, Calgary, AB, T3E 6K6, Canada. E-mail: mgardiner@mtroyal.ca

³ Mount Royal University. Department of Humanities. 4825 Mount Royal Gate SW, Calgary, AB, T3E 6K6, Canada. E-mail: sengler@mtroyal.ca

plicitamente relevantes em teorias de significado propostas para qualquer discurso, e (ii) esses processos precisam de suplementação semântica com referência a fatores externos e naturalistas (biológicos, culturais, ambientais, etc.).

Palavras-chave: ciência cognitiva da religião, teoria cognitiva, holismo, semântica, filosofia da linguagem, ciências da religião, teoria da religião.

The aim of this paper is to explore some of the connections between one particular influential position in philosophical semantics – Donald Davidson’s semantic holism – and a relatively sub-area of the study of religion/s, the cognitive science/study of religion (CSR). Our main interests are to understand the extent to which these two positions harmonize and where they stand in tension.

By “the study of religion/s” we mean the academic and empirically grounded study of specific religions along with theoretical and meta-theoretical discussions related to the nature and scope of the category ‘religion.’⁴ Like the study of culture more generally, this discipline’s central object of study is accessible only through theoretical reflection. In other words, scholars of religion/s must begin with some sort of theoretical stance on the nature of religion in general, and thus the study of religion/s goes hand in hand with theorizing religion. Theorizing is language dependent, and one of our central theses – though not argued for here – is that theorizing is constrained by how language works. In other words, basic commitments in the philosophy of language impact how one can think or theorize about something. To the extent that CSR can be thought of as one of the more recent and promising theories of religion, or at least a theoretical approach to studying religion, the philosophy of language is relevant to it.

Our research question is “to what extent do CSR and DSH harmonize?” The details of our metatheoretical stance on the relation of philosophy of language to social science in general, and to the study of religion in particular, will be left largely undeveloped here (for further details see Engler and Gardiner, 2010, 2013, 2015, 2017b; Gardiner and Engler, 2010, 2012). We consider the relationship from only a single perspective in the philosophy of language, namely that of Donald Davidson.⁵ His overall theory of language, which we will call Davidsonian Semantic Holism (DSH), is well known in philosophy, though less so in the study of religion/s. However, an important set of relatively recent works have emerged which examine the significance of philosophical semantics in general, and of Donald Davidson in particular, for theory of religion.⁶ Davidson’s position is complex, especially

in its details, and we will explain its relevant key features as we go along, ignoring many others that are less central.

Background

Cognitive science/Study of religion

In order to consider the interplay between DSH and CSR, we need to characterize both. We begin here with the latter. Proponents of CSR tend to emphasize its status as an emerging and multi-disciplinary research *programme* rather than as a well-defined or articulated theory. However, the task of raising incisive semantic questions requires that we engage a fairly concrete position. This section of the paper offers an ideal-typical account of CSR, concentrating especially on those elements which impinge on DSH.⁷

In general terms, CSR posits that (i) religious beliefs, and so behaviors, are (ii) caused, constrained, made possible or, in some other sense, characterized by (iii) normal, innate, domain-specific, mental or psychological structures, modules, tools, inference systems, or representation systems: e.g., “Religion ensues from the ordinary workings of the human mind...” (Atran, 2002, p. ix); “the adult human brain possesses an array of specialized tools ... [and] these tools are factors that might help account for cross-cultural or recurrent features of human thought and behavior, such a beliefs in gods and God” (Barrett, 2004, p. 3, 5); On the one hand, CSR holds that religion is constrained by innate factors in the same way as other domains of human thought and action; as a result, the explanatory principles that underlie this approach to the study of religion are common to all (normal adult) humans and, hence, are applicable to other aspects of culture: e.g., “the mental representation of God and of buddhas are made possible by the same mental mechanisms that are used in representing ourselves and our fellow human beings as embodied agents” (Pyysiäinen, 2009, p. vii); “members of the cognitivist school are concerned with showing that innate and therefore universal features of cognitive organization are responsible

⁴ On the status of the study of religion/s as a discipline, see Engler and Stausberg (2011).

⁵ Davidson is one of the most important and influential philosophers of the 20th Century, at least in the Anglo-American tradition. He published seminal work in action theory, epistemology, metaphysics, decision theory and philosophy of language in important collections of essays: e.g., Davidson (1982, 1984a, 2001a, 2005).

⁶ For a representative sample, see the following: Godlove (1989, 2014); Lawson and McCauley (1990); Penner (1994, 1999); Frankenberry and Penner (1999); Frankenberry (2002); Schilbrack (2014); Davis (2012); Jensen (2003, 2004, 2014); Gardiner and Engler (2010, 2012); Engler and Gardiner (2010, 2012, 2013, 2017b); Bush (2014).

⁷ See Engler and Gardiner (2017a) for a discussion of some of the main critical responses that have been made to CSR.

for the attractor positions around which patterns of cultural innovation tend to congregate” (Whitehouse, 2004, p. 21). On the other hand, CSR offers varying accounts of the distinctive nature of religious thinking: e.g., “religious concepts invariably include information that is counter-intuitive...” (Boyer, 2001, p. 65, original emphasis); “the cognitive basis for religion is a generalisation and systematization of an innate human tendency towards anthropomorphic models for representing our environment” (see Guthrie, 1993; Martin, 2003, p. 221).

Arriving at a more specific characterization of CSR involves searching for a common core behind the diverse approaches associated with this sub-field of the study of religion. Scholars in the area claim several distinct names for their field: “cognitive science of religion” (Lawson, 2000; Pyysiäinen, 2001; Barrett, 2007a); “cognitive theory of religion” (Boyer, 1994; Anttonen, 2000; Whitehouse, 2004); “cognitive study of religion” (Kamppinen, 2001); “cognitive approaches to religion” (Boyer, 1990; Geertz, 2004), “cognitive perspectives on religion” (Whitehouse, 1998; Andresen, 2001), or “cognitive foundations of religion” (Whitehouse and McCauley, 2005). As this range of descriptions suggests, there is no broad consensus regarding the status, or the theoretical presuppositions, of CSR. This holds even within the narrower ‘scientific’ conception of the sub-field: “‘Cognitive science of religion’ is now an established term but the field it is meant to cover is by no means homogeneous” (Pyysiäinen, 2008, p. 101). The remainder of this section characterizes CSR in terms of a minimal core of its claims and concomitants.

CSR is primarily concerned with two specific aspects of religion: the *representation* and *transmission* of religious concepts: e.g., “the spread of spirit phenomena is in part explained by universal micromechanisms of cognition that generate predispositions and tendencies toward certain patterns of thinking and behavior” (Cohen, 2007, p. 181); “the cognitive science of religion [...] [is] a field that emerged in the 1990s as an attempt to explain how the structure of religious rituals is mentally represented and how religious concepts are culturally transmitted” (Pyysiäinen, 2008, p. 101).

CSR is centrally concerned with explaining the causes of religious belief: “A theory of religion must include a theory of religious belief, and a theory of belief must address the source of belief [...]” (Guthrie, 1993, p. 31). CSR tends to use a variety of terms to explain the relation between basic cognitive structures or processes and religious beliefs: ‘constrain,’ ‘influence,’ ‘generate,’ etc. On the one hand, this raises the possibility that at least some work in CSR is not concerned with the basic causal factors of beliefs but rather with the way in which beliefs, whatever their cause, are shaped, channeled, altered or selected for under certain conditions. On the other hand,

no work we are aware of clearly and explicitly makes such claims, over against a causal account, and such an alternative non-causal approach would still face important semantic questions. For the purpose of this paper, we investigate an account that looks to cognitive factors as standing in a causal relation to religious belief. At the very least, this explores the semantic status of at least an important approach within a broader conception of CSR.

Thus, for clarity’s sake, we will attribute the following two main elements to CSR and treat it as if it were a homogeneous theory:

- (1) Religious beliefs are an important item of investigation for the study of religion/s.
- (2) The formulation and transmission of religious beliefs are to be explained as the causal result of (near) universal and innate cognitive/psychological processes in the human mind/brain.

In terms of the role of religious belief for the study of religion/s, we follow Godlove (2002) in identifying two main and antagonistic streams: (i) those that hold that “belief” is an explanatorily important category, and (ii) those that hold it is of no explanatory interest or importance whatsoever. We’ll dub the first position “pro-belief” and the second “anti-belief.” Thus, one of the central tenets we assign to CSR is the centrality of the category of (religious) belief.⁸ A third common tenet, though not one central to our discussion, has been the idea that there is a definitive element to religious belief involving purported allusion, at some level, to “supernatural agents.”⁹

Philosophical semantics

This section offers an overview of theories of meaning, followed by a closer look at DSH. The study of religion, and more surprisingly theories of religion, seldom pay explicit attention to issues of semantics, though there are important exceptions (see footnote 6). Our choice to place CSR in dialogue with semantic theory is not an idle one: no theory of religion can get off the ground without at least an implicit theory of meaning.

We use the expression “theory of meaning” to refer to a broad philosophical theory about the nature of the meaning of particular bits of language, principally sentences. We take it for granted that languages are, by and large, human artifacts whose core use is as a vehicle for communication and expression of propositional attitudes (beliefs, desires, etc.), or of thought more generally. As such, much of philosophical semantics involves elements of the philosophy of mind,

⁸ We recognize that this will be problematic. Davis (2007) for example castigates CSR as a “degenerate research programme” in part because he views it as eliminativist of belief. However, as tenet (2) asserts, CSR has been actively engaged in seeking to explain the origins, function, and transmission of religious beliefs, including ritual. We will further argue this point later in the paper.

⁹ There is some variety in how this is to be understood, ranging from “superhuman agency” (Lawson and McCauley, 1990), to “anthropomorphism” (Guthrie, 1993), to “counterintuitive supernatural agents” (Atran and Norenzayan, 2004), amongst others.

of which cognitive psychology has been of particular interest and importance. We point scholars to Jeppe Sinding Jensen's excellent article, "Meaning and Religion: On Semantics in the Study of Religion" (2004) for an overview of the positions and history of semantic theory with special emphasis on the study of religion. Following his lead, we reserve the term "meaning" to the semantic contents of sentences – to *what is said* by an utterance, what thought is conveyed by a claim, what a listener would need to understand in order to grasp what was said, what particular assertions are about, etc.¹⁰

Although the history of semantics is long and varied, and there are many distinct axes in the topology of possible theories, in this article we will concentrate on a triad along just one of them:

- *Semantic Internalism*: The meaning of a sentence is solely determined by the intentions of the speaker – the sentence means whatever she intends it to mean, regardless of whether others are in a position to understand it. Meanings are "in the head."
- *Semantic Externalism*: The meaning of a sentence is solely determined by an objective relation between the sentence and mind-independent entities. The speaker need not have any beliefs about or knowledge of the meaning of her own utterances. Meanings "just ain't in the head"¹¹ and so have a public and empirically accessible dimension.¹²
- *Mixed Semantic Theories*: The meaning of a sentence is given by the intentions of a speaker to report her beliefs, where her beliefs are causally related, in part, to external factors. The speaker is in a privileged position *via-à-vis* knowledge of the meaning of her own utterances, but it must be possible, in practice, for others to correctly interpret her sentences.

Theorists of religion can ignore but not avoid taking a stance regarding these semantic options, even if implicit. The adoption or primacy of a semantic theory will have substantial methodological implications for the study of religion. Internalism, for example, suggests that the means to understanding a particular religion is to determine the intentional content as far as the believer is concerned. The phonetic vocalizations might perhaps be taken as a syntactic "code" which, if cracked, would allow the researcher access to the normally private and hidden mental states of the believer. Phenomenological analy-

sis springs to mind here. Externalism, on the other hand, would regard the vocalizations of participants as largely irrelevant – the researcher should concentrate on publicly observable factors, such as the social function of the discourse/ritual. Functional or structuralist analyses would seem plausible here.

There is a natural affinity between these semantic theories and the two attitudes, noted above, about the status of belief as a basic category in the study of religion. Pro-belief theorists of religion should favour either internalism or mixed theories. Those who are anti-belief should be inclined towards externalist views. Again, we assert that the issue cannot be avoided: theories of religion are *not* semantically neutral. The rational defensibility of a theory in one discipline rests, in part, on how well it harmonizes with or finds support from well-supported theories from other disciplines. Arguably, semantic theories are among the most fundamental of theories that should be reckoned with. If, for example, semantic externalism were shown to have significant problems, this would have a significant, and negative impact, on theories of religion that discounted the concept of 'belief', if these naturally harmonize in the way we have suggested. In other words, denying the importance of 'belief' in the study of religion does not sidestep the need to make sense of meaning.

The take-home point of this topography is that DSH is a mixed semantic theory (details to be filled in a bit more in the next section) that is pro-belief in orientation. We can thus refine our research question: to what extent does CSR harmonize with mixed semantic theories and with a pro-belief orientation?

We move on now to a closer look at DSH. In contrast to the term "theory of meaning," Davidson (1990) uses "meaning-theory" as a proposed theory for a given language L which generates meaning-specifying theorems for any given sentence of the form:

's' means p

The first component of Davidson's project argues that Tarski's (1944) "semantic" definition of truth (in terms of 'satisfaction'), which generates "T-sentences" of the form:

's' is true iff p

provides all the formal and structural elements for a meaning-theory. In other words, Davidson argued that a Tar-

¹⁰ A distinction is often drawn between "semantics" and "pragmatics," or between what a sentence means and how it may be used. There is considerable debate in the philosophy of language whether this distinction can be sustained (e.g., the essays in Ezcurdia and Stainton, 2013) and whether particular uses of language, especially assertion, can be selected as paradigmatic. For simplicity, in this article we incline towards the view that assertion is the primary use of language, and hence that semantic content is by-and-large expressible in truth-evaluable form.

¹¹ The externalist slogan "Meanings just ain't in the head" comes from Putnam (1975, p. 227) who, together with Kripke (1980), did pioneering work in developing an externalist position that has come to be called the Causal Theory of Reference. That work involved construction of some of the most compelling arguments against semantic internalism.

¹² DeCaro (1999) distinguishes between various types of externalism, suggesting that Davidson falls into the category of "triangular externalism" in which semantic content is fixed by a triple relation between an individual, a linguistic community, and the external world. For reasons that should become clear, we consider Davidson to be neither internalist nor fully externalist.

skian truth-theory is a meaning-theory. Hence, Davidson endorses a truth-conditional theory of meaning.¹³

With respect to CSR, there are a number of vital elements of Davidson's thought needing highlight:

- (1) On pain of the semantic paradoxes, the "s" and the "p" in the T-sentence must be in different languages. The T-sentences, then, purport to provide translations; translatability, or, for a more familiar Davidsonian term, interpretability, is a precondition for the very possibility of meaning (see LePore and McLaughlin, 1985).
- (2) A meaning-theory is *formally* adequate to the extent that it delivers T-sentences as theorems, but is *materially adequate* iff it delivers the *correct* T-sentences (i.e., expresses genuine synonymies between "s" and "p"). Davidson views each formally adequate meaning-theory as a proposal that must then be empirically tested for material adequacy.
- (3) Interpretation involves a relation between what we will call *s*peakers and interpreters. An interpreter is implicitly attempting to construct a correct meaning-theory with respect to some *s*peaker (or community of *s*peakers). Davidson's strategy requires the primacy of what he calls "radical interpretation," where the *s*peaker and interpreter are not presumed to share a language (e.g., Davidson, 1984c [1973], 1974, 1984d [1974], 1980, 2001b [1983]).
- (4) *S*peakers do not interpret their own utterances. Rather, we presume that they have "First-Person Authority" with respect to their own claims. By this, Davidson does not hold a Cartesian thesis about incorrigibility or that meaning is somehow private. What he means is that we know what is meant when we *s*peak in a way that we do not when others *s*peak. Specifically, we must "interpret" the utterances of others, but not our own, by implicit reference to a constructible meaning-theory.¹⁴
- (5) Not only is language the vehicle through which thought is expressed, meaning is correlative with belief: "We do not know what someone means unless we know what he believes; we do not know what someone believes unless we know what he means" (Davidson, 1984b [1967], p. 27). Interpretability requires breaking into this "meaning-belief" circle.

Davidson's proposal involves two assumptions: (i) First-Person Authority, and (ii) the Principle of Charity.¹⁵ The first assumption allows the interpreter to break into the 'meaning-belief circle' in her own case, and the second assumption allows her to bootstrap to the third-person case. In a proposed T-sentence "'s' is true iff p," the interpreter assumes knowledge of the meaning of 'p' (= First-Person Authority), correlates her believing 'p' with a set of accessible causal conditions, presumes that the *s*peaker will also correlate his beliefs with the same causal conditions (= Principle of Charity), and hence have a basis for translating the *s*peaker's 's' with her own 'p'. Thus, the causal conditions must be equally accessible by *s*peaker and interpreter.

- (6) Davidson identifies the semantic content of utterances in two distinct ways. The most well-known is the identification with truth-conditions:

[To] give the truth conditions is a way of giving the meaning of a sentence. To know the semantic concept of truth for a language is to know what it is for a sentence – any sentence – to be true, and this amounts, in one good sense we can give to the phrase, to understand the language (Davidson, 1984b [1967], p. 24).

The second is with the causes of belief: "Words and thoughts are, in the most basic cases, necessarily about the sorts of objects and events that commonly cause them [...] Our simplest sentences are given their meanings by the situations that generally cause us to hold them as true or false" (Davidson, 2001e [1988], p. 45).

This second point is crucial for assessing CSR: a Davidsonian account of the meaning of religious beliefs will be inseparable from an account of the causes of those beliefs.

Davidson tends to modify these claims with "in the simplest and most basic cases" type of clauses, suggesting that an account of the meaning of more complex or higher-level sentences might be given differently. Although this is a matter of some controversy, we note three possible views: (i) the identification of semantic content with the observable causes of belief holds for all language, including "less basic" cases¹⁶; (ii) although the semantic contents of "less basic" beliefs are

¹³ Although Davidson regards truth-conditions as the core concept in an account of meaning, he denies that truth has any robust or metaphysically-loaded content, as for example that offered by a correspondence theory of truth. See Davidson (1990, 1996) and Gardiner and Engler (2010).

¹⁴ See for example Davidson (2001c [1984], 1986, 2001d [1987], 2001e [1988]). Godlove points out that first person authority with respect to religious discourse is often questioned by scholars of religion, and his analysis of why it is less secure in such contexts as opposed to more concrete discourse plays an important role in his discussion of the nature and use of "frameworks" within theories of religion (Godlove, 1989). We will return to this point later.

¹⁵ The Principle of Charity involves the presumption an interpreter must make that speakers are as rational as she is. See for example Davidson (1984c [1973], 1984d [1974], 2001b [1983], 1986, 1994, 1999).

¹⁶ There are some passages in which this seems to be Davidson's position. See, for example, Davidson (2001e [1988], p. 51; 1984b [1967], p. 31).

separate from their relevant observable causes, nonetheless they must be “traced back” to that of the “basic cases”; and (iii) the semantic constraints on “less basic” beliefs are substantially different from those on the “basic cases.” We will return to this point later.

However, with respect to at least the “basic cases,” Davidson sees the “truth-conditional” identification of semantic content as equivalent to the causal one:

[We] are justified in asserting a sentence in the required sense only if we believe the sentence we use to make the assertion is true; and what ultimately ties language to the world is that the conditions which typically cause us to hold sentences true constitute the truth-conditions, and hence the meanings, of our sentence (Davidson, 1996, p. 275, original emphasis).

The core issue: The threat to First-Person Authority

This raises the final refinement of our research question: to what extent do the tri-identifications of truth-conditions = causes of beliefs = semantic content harmonize with CSR? In our view, there is a prima facie incompatibility between (i) CSR, (ii) Davidson’s account of semantic content, and (iii) the presumption of First-Person Authority. As (ii) and (iii) seem to be central to Davidson’s project, there is a prima facie incompatibility between CSR and DSH. The task in this section is to explain that prima facie tension, explore its resolution, and point at some broad conclusions for the study of religion.

The tension

There appear to be counter-examples to Davidson’s tri-identifications. For example, the truth-conditions of my utterance “The sun is shining” presumably involve a shining sun, but imagine that I come to believe that as a result of a nocturnal hypnotism. In this case, the cause of my belief and its truth-conditions appear to diverge, and we are left in a quandary as to the semantic content of my utterance. We seem to be initially faced with a dilemma: either (i) the content of my utterance is given by its cause rather than its truth-conditions, in which case (as I have no beliefs about the cause) I fail to understand the content of my own utterance (i.e., First-Person Authority is lost), or (ii) the content is given by the truth-con-

ditions, in which case the causal antecedents are semantically impotent (i.e., radical interpretation is imperiled). Both horns are equally problematic to Davidson’s project.

To be sure, in the example it seems promising to deny that one actually does *believe* what is suggested in the hypnotic trance. However, CSR appears to provide more compelling counter-examples. One of its basic tenets is that the causes of religious belief are to be located in cognitive processes in the mind/brain. Therefore, under the “cause = semantic content” identification, an expression of religious belief, say “God blesses this marriage,” is to be interpreted as being *about* those cognitive processes; i.e., a correct meaning-theory should be constructible in which the translation would be in the language of cognitive psychology or neuroscience. But, surely the speaker would, if able to understand the proposed translation, reject it *as* a translation. She would be much more likely to regard her statement as being *about* God, marriages, and benedictions. In other words, CSR + “cause = content” is incompatible with the presumption of First-Person Authority.¹⁷ Indeed, the failure of First-Person Authority would be systemic and wholesale; insiders would have no idea what they are talking about; only the scholar of CSR would have a chance of knowing what they ‘really’ mean. As Davidson puts the point:

[If] the correct determination of an agent’s thoughts depends, at least to some degree, on the causal history of those thoughts, and the agent may be ignorant of that history, then the agent may not know what he thinks (and, mutatis mutandis, what he means, intends, etc.). The new antisubjectivism [i.e., the rejection of semantic internalism] is thus seen as a threat to first person authority – to the fact that people generally know without recourse to inference from evidence, and so in a way that others do not, what they themselves think, want, and intend (Davidson, 2001e [1988], p. 48).¹⁸

We will deal with the difficulties of this view – especially for CSR – shortly.

On the other hand, consider the “truth-conditions = semantic content” identification. Here we must make a tricky distinction between truth-conditions as they are “in reality” and as they are conceived by some speaker. Consider an example invoking logical behaviourism: what are the truth-conditions for the sentence “Jones is in pain”? We cannot, without vacuity, merely say that they are that Jones be in pain, for there are at least two rival theories about what that amounts to: his

¹⁷ There is a logically possible – though courageous – resolution of the tension. One could argue that the cognitive processes are merely *intermediary* causes, where even they themselves are to be explained by reference to God – i.e., that God ordained it such that we developed the cognitive processes which brought about religious beliefs. In that way, the speaker’s opinion that her utterance is *about* God is correct – it is, as God is the (ultimate) cause of her belief. Thus, a transcendental argument for the existence of God emerges: God’s existence is a necessary precondition for the consistency of CSR and semantic holism. We won’t even begin to discuss what is wrong with this argument...

¹⁸ Although Davidson thinks that this involves a “misunderstanding,” his argument is not compelling in the case of religious discourse.

undergoing a certain phenomenal experience and his being disposed to manifest pain behaviour. The logical behaviourist could regard the first as the truth-conditions that are normally supposed by the naïve, whereas the second are the “real” truth-conditions. So, which are the truth-conditions supplied on the right-hand side of its “correct” T-sentence? Analogously, which of the practitioner’s or CSR’s assigned truth-conditions provides the semantic content to “God blesses this marriage”; is it *about* God, marriages, and benedictions or *about* cognitive processes? Either (i) the “subjective” assignment of truth-conditions semantically trumps the “actual” truth-conditions; or (ii) the reverse holds.

By rejecting all “substantive” accounts of truth (e.g., correspondence and coherence), Davidson rejects the grounds for drawing the distinction. However, it can be recast in this form: which of the truth-conditions as posited by the naïve or the learned supply the semantic content? This display reveals the confusion: a meaning-theory is an attempt to translate *from* the speaker’s language *to* the interpreter’s, and so it is the truth-conditions as intended by the speaker which have primacy. If the interpreter supplies truth-conditions not intended by the speaker, she simply fails to translate. Davidson characterizes “meaning” as “a definite cognitive content that its author wishes to convey and that the interpreter must grasp if he is to get the message” (1984e [1978], p. 262). He reinforces this in a later article: “A malapropism or slip of the tongue, if it means anything, means what its promulgator intends it to mean. [...] An utterance has certain truth-conditions only if the speaker intends it to be interpreted as having those truth-conditions” (Davidson, 1990, p. 310). And most recently: “If we want to understand a particular speaker, we must somehow know or find out or intuit what that particular speaker takes to be the truth conditions of his or her utterance” (Davidson, 1999, p. 33). Of course, determining which truth-conditions a speaker assigns to their utterances *just is* to interpret their speech.

So, where does this leave CSR with respect to the “truth-conditions = semantic content” identification? In the first place, it seems we must reject the idea that CSR gives us insight into the truth-conditions of religious claims. Period. Some might be tempted to add the clause “as they are understood by religious practitioners,” but we have just argued that this clause adds nothing. We imagine that some, like Barrett (2007b), will not find this problematic, but suspect that at least some will find this result sobering. In the second place, divorcing truth-conditions from CSR-understood causes leaves the key theses of CSR of virtually no semantic explanatory value. This would certainly reduce the aspirations of CSR to give a theory of or to *explain* religious belief, as beliefs are fundamentally semantic entities.

Where does this leave the apparent tension between the twin identifications of “truth-conditions” = “semantic content” and “causes of belief” = “semantic content”? On the one hand, it is tempting to conclude that, as DSH requires that the identifications be equivalent, and CSR shows that

they aren’t, so much the worse for DSH. Alternatively, as CSR challenges only the latter identification, a closer look at that is warranted. Recall that the primary tension is that, in the case of religious language, CSR coupled with the identification jeopardizes the presumption of First-Person Authority. That is, by offering a reductionist account of the causes of religious belief, CSR undermines insider’s claim to know what they mean when they use religious language.

CSR and the Centrality of Belief

The challenge to First-Person Authority threatens CSR for methodological reasons. Much of the research in CSR has involved these steps: (i) identify a class of religious beliefs in some linguistic community, and (ii) through social scientific statistical analysis and empirically testable hypotheses, correlate those beliefs with certain universal psychological processes. The psychological processes in (ii) then serve to explain a number of features of the beliefs in (i), in particular of the function, transmissibility and utility of religious belief. As such CSR could be taken as a theory of religion – i.e., as an explanation of religious belief.

The methodological curiosity involves the first step – the identification of a class of religious beliefs in a linguistic community. Difficulties in being able to so identify beliefs would be difficulties in employing the methodological apparatus of CSR.

How can a researcher identify a class of religious beliefs? One possibility is to have speakers self-classify their beliefs as religious/non-religious. However, this suggestion implausibly requires that speakers clearly distinguish between their religious and non-religious beliefs, and that the category of the “religious” is understood uniformly between speaker and interpreter. Most seriously, though, it assumes that speakers have First-Person Authority with respect to their religious beliefs, which CSR challenges. Another possibility is to equip the interpreter with some pre-established criteria – such as implicit reference to counterintuitive supernatural agents – and have her classify the beliefs of speakers. But, on what basis can a set of criteria be pre-established? This seems to require a theory of religion as a pre-condition for CSR-inspired research, and hence it would be difficult to see CSR itself as offering a theory of religion. This would also be problematic in assuming that the interpreter can understand the utterances of the speaker (at least, enough to classify them) outside of the conditions of radical interpretation.

A third possibility is suggested by Godlove’s “transcendental placing of religious belief” (1989, p. 122). In the case of recognizing a sentence *as* religious, Godlove presents an argument similar to Davidson’s, that to recognize a vocalization *as* a sentence requires the presupposition of a number of factors. Godlove accepts one over-arching formal condition: that the sentence be “theoretical” as opposed to “observational” (meaning, primarily, it resists correlation with changes in

the observable environment – i.e., resistance to radical interpretation), and interestingly denies that there can be any “material” constraints, such as those proposed by CSR (e.g., “extrahuman generality” [1989, p. 142]): “Any strategy that tries to set material restrictions on the possible scope of religious belief must, I think, fail; we can expect at most formal constraints” (1989, p. 145). As resistance to radical interpretation is his primary formal constraint on religiosity, he recognizes that he needs a mechanism for being able to distinguish between meaningless noise and meaningful expression of religious belief. He proposes the Davidsonian notion that “the basic cases” will be the majority, and success in interpretation of them would vindicate the ascription of rationality to the speaker (i.e., move Charity from an initial presumption to get interpretation off the ground to an empirically grounded formative principle) (1989, p. 156-157); i.e., difficult-to-interpret vocalizations are more likely to be meaningful than empty noise. In those cases, the presumption of First-Person Authority is indeed jeopardized:

If [...] religious discourse is typically highly theoretical [...] we will, on that account, be pushed towards a naturalistic interpretative strategy. That is, we will be pushed towards an interpretative strategy that frees the meaning of an utterance in ignorance of what the speaker may take to determine its meaning. And so we may find it necessary to interpret an utterance by connecting it with an event (a cause) of which the speaker seems unaware (Godlove, 1989, p. 155).

Godlove is essentially proposing a semantic bifurcation. In the observational “basic cases” truth-conditions (as posited by believers) and causes coincide, and a Davidsonian semantics is unproblematic. In theoretical “religious” cases, though, truth-conditions (as posited by believers) diverge, and their semantic content is given by their (unknown-to-the-speaker) causes. Failure of First-Person Authority is simply a causality of this consequence. Methodologically, the interpreter should adopt the latter interpretative strategy at the point where the former fails (Godlove, 1989, p. 157).

As interesting and rich as Godlove’s proposal is, it faces difficulties. In the first place, it is difficult to see how, on his account of religious language, interpretation involves translation from one language to another, the lynch pin of the formal apparatus of theories of meaning according to Davidson’s project. Secondly, it eschews a role for speaker intentionality, reducing the semantics of religious discourse to a purely “externalist” form. Finally, it faces a problem common to all forms of “bifurcated” theories of meaning – how to inter-

pret language which crosses specialized discourses. “Yahweh appeared as a burning bush” involves a challenging blend of “religious” and “observational” language (Engler and Gardiner, 2010, p. 289).¹⁹

In any event, we are still left with the problem: how can we distinguish religious from non-religious belief, as CSR methodologically requires us to do, and do so (i) in a manner consistent with DSH, and (ii) *prior* to exploring the origin, function, transmission, etc. of those beliefs?

A final response and concluding remarks

A fourth possibility is to eschew any semantic distinction between religious and non-religious discourse. In such a case, there is no question of the methodological need to identify a range of “religious” beliefs for which CSR would seek explanatory causes in terms of cognitive psychological processes. Either such processes would be semantically neutral with respect to all forms of discourse, or else would be equally potent with respect to all. Religious language would be “as public as marriage and as observable as agriculture” (Geertz, 1973, p. 91). Jensen expresses the point nicely:

The question seems to be whether there really is any such specific entity as ‘religious language’ and/or whether the semantics of religious systems are just ‘plain’ semantics of an order similar to other specialized terminological systems, those of, say, politics, sports or economics (2004, p. 220).

Jensen clearly opts for unity of discourse: “[It] makes no sense to say that religious language has its own special truth conditions not commensurate with or translatable into other forms of language. Religious language is an aspect-specific extension of ordinary language” (1999, p. 421).

We end with some brief reflections about the prospects of this possibility, especially with regard to CSR.

In our view, Davidson’s programme is antithetical to bifurcated theories of meaning: meaning is meaning; and the conditions of radical interpretation, if they have any force, supply the basic constraints on the interpretation of any discourse. Hence, Davidsonians should find this proposal promising. To be sure, though, it continues to face the problem of applying those conditions beyond “the basic cases.”

Perhaps the problem, however, is in giving a rather narrow reading to the causes of religious belief, or of viewing CSR as overly reductionistic. By widening the lens, perhaps a number of issues can be made clearer and problems dissolved.

¹⁹ This problem is analogous to that first explored in connection with ethical discourse; early emotivists had argued that ethical discourse is purely expressive of emotions and hence have no truth-value. The Frege-Geach problem involves embedding such sentences in larger contexts which seem to be truth-evaluable, such as “If it is wrong to steal, then it is wrong to get little brother to steal.” The consequent seems to be entailed by the antecedent, but entailment is a relation between truth-valued claims (Geach, 1965).

Davidson insists on the *public* or *observational* conditions involved in radical interpretation.²⁰ However, in the “basic cases” observation seems reduced to *perceptual* observation, and this raises the difficulty of how mere perception can play a role in detecting changes in the *observable* environment in cases which are non-perceptual (e.g., religion, math, logic, and perhaps ethics). But, if by “observational” we mean “naturalistic” in the sense of accessible to investigation by natural means, which includes the natural *and social sciences*, this might offer a way out. The public conditions in which, for example, religious language is used seemingly must involve social or institutional elements. Interpretation of “God blesses this marriage” is seemingly impossible without some reflective appreciation of purely perceptual elements (e.g., the movements of the priest with respect to the betrothed), but also such things as the social context of the ritual movements, the attitudes of others involved, the semantic interpretation of other bits of language (e.g., liturgy), etc. This is another aspect of “holism” – one area of language cannot be interpreted in isolation, but only as part of connections to others, which must be understood as filtered through (largely shared) canons of rationality and against a large background of (mostly true) shared beliefs. Traditional approaches to the study of religion/s, including textual hermeneutics, anthropology, sociology, psychology, discourse analysis, etc., would have important roles to play.

Where does this leave CSR? The growing evidence seems to be that there are common cognitive psychological processes involved in the formulation and transmission of “religious” beliefs. These are amongst the “causes” of religious belief, but cannot be identified as the *sole* causes. In an analogous vein, the social contexts also provide *causal* factors in the formation and transmission of “religious” belief, but they cannot be identified as the *sole* causes either. Both might play important causal roles, and thus are semantically relevant within a Davidsonian approach.²¹

In our view, this seems reasonable for all bits of language. The cause of my belief that the sun is shining is not just the shining of the sun (and that I am responsive to changes in the environment with respect to the shining of the sun), but also that, for whatever reason, I emerged as a creature having the neurological/cognitive capacities to *observe* my environment (i.e., to formulate beliefs on the basis of observation). That you and I can *both* believe that the sun is shining – i.e., that we can share the same belief – presupposes both a commonality in our cognitive processing as well as a commonality in our access to and responsiveness to an “external” world.

We conclude with optimism about the prospects of these claims: (i) there are common cognitive neural/psychological processes which are explanatorily relevant in proposed

meaning-theories for any discourse, and (ii) those processes need semantic supplementation with reference to “external” and “naturalistic” factors. Religious discourse, as much as any discourse, requires interpretation by “connecting cognition and culture” (Lawson and McCauley, 1990).

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²⁰ One of the authors (Gardiner, 2015) argues for privileging observational evidence in the process of interpretation.

²¹ The following quote from Davidson (2001e [1988], p. 44) supports this reading: “[The] correct interpretation of what a speaker means is not determined solely by what is in his head; it depends also on the natural history of what is in the head” – that is, as long as social linguistic conventions can be deemed part of the natural history of words, which play a role in identifying mental content.

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